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Aislinn Clarke on Irish Folk Horror 'Fréwaka': "There's A Lot of Trauma in Ireland"

The writer-director, who debuted the film at Locarno, also discusses using the Irish language and her "rage against the historical treatment of women in Ireland."

Georg Szalai

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'Fréwaka'

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Writer and director Aislinn Clarke, based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, made a name for herself with her 2018 debut horror film *The Devil's Doorway*. Her new movie *Fréwaka*, which had its world premiere at the 77th edition of the Locarno Film Festival, uses Irish and English and is billed as the first-ever Irish-language horror.

“Shoo is sent to a remote village to care for an agoraphobic woman who fears sinister entities, the Na Sídhe,” reads a plot description. “As they develop a connection, Shoo is consumed by the old woman’s paranoia, rituals and superstitions, eventually confronting the horrors of her past.”

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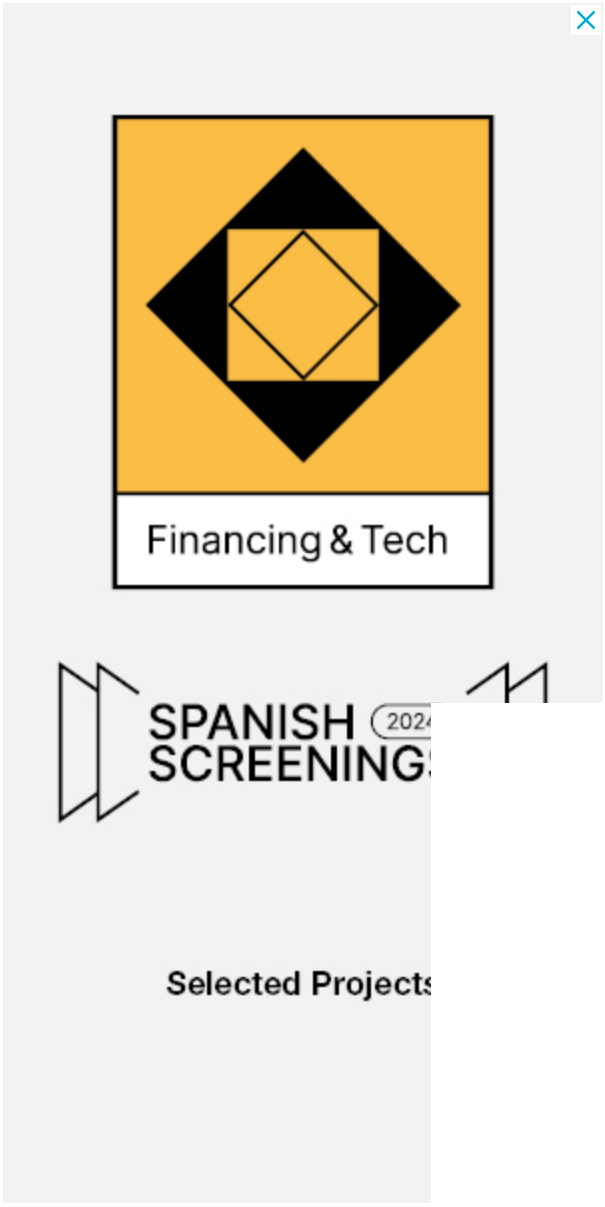

The film, which stars Clare Monnelly, Bríd Ní Neachtain (*The Banshees of Inisherin*), and Aleksandra Bystrzhitskaya, screened in an out-of-competition slot at Locarno77.

Clarke sat down with *THR* in Locarno to discuss her fascination with horror and religion, and why scary films have global appeal.

I'm sorry to say that I don't know enough about the Irish language. Could you please pronounce the film's title for me and explain what it means?

It's pronounced "fréwaka." The literal translation in English is "roots," but in Irish — you can tell just by how it sounds versus the word "roots" — is much more heavy and textured. It has this sense of heavy roots that are hard to pull out of the ground. And that's the

sense that I wanted, rather than the English translation, which is a bit too slight for me.

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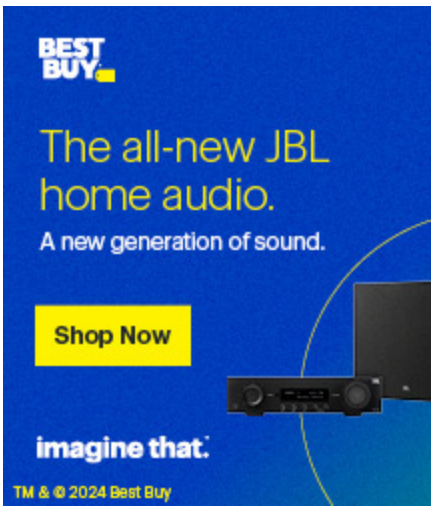

Shoo must face family issues and the horrors of the past. Why is that a theme for you and does Irish history play into that?

It could well be the same in many other places, but my direct experiences in Ireland are of historical trauma, and there's a lot of trauma in Ireland. So, there's a lot to work with. It's ever-present, and it's very hard to shake off. So you can talk about intergenerational trauma and how it can be passed down through generations.

There was even a study a couple of years ago about how the potato famine had a physiological effect on the generations that followed because their forebears had lived through starvation. So, there is the physical inheritance of trauma, but there is also what's given to you, what's passed down from your parents and grandparents, also in stories and myths. So I think it's hard to escape it. It's ever-present, and it kind of tinges everything.

I'm glad you mentioned myths. I loved that the film uses Irish folklore and found myself reading up on some of it. How much of that did you know versus having to research it, and did you make up or embellish much?

I didn't actually research that. I was brought up with Irish myths and stories. Irish people are storytellers naturally. So it's hard to escape that in school and at home. And I didn't want to research and then

find some sort of rubber-stamped version of the mythology because I don't think that's how it was ever established. I think Irish stories were handed down by word of mouth for generations, and they would be changed a little bit — if the person had a bit of whiskey, or if they were in a different mood. So, I think that sort of texture is what Irish mythology is truthfully. So it's my lens on what those stories are. It's what I remember. It's the stories that I was told as a child, and what I remember from them, or my perspective on them. So I'm continuing the oral tradition, I suppose. This is my addition to that.

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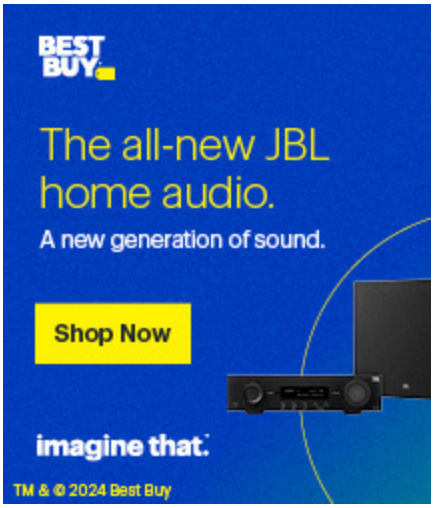

The film is being billed as the first-ever Irish-language horror movie. Why did you set out to make it in Irish and how did you decide to mix in English as well?

If you're making a film in the Irish language, for this specific financing system that we have, you were allowed to have 70 percent Irish, 30 percent English. For me, you could do the whole film completely in Irish. But I wanted to have some English in it because I wanted it to really reflect our modern society as well, as much as I could.

We have Shoo from the city who goes to this rural place, but she's very modern. She's a very modern Irish character. And she's in a same-sex relationship. She thinks she's the opposite, the progressive version of Peig who is very stuck in the past, in the old ways. I like this kind of confrontation of two things and also the fact that in rural Irish-speaking parts of Ireland you sometimes get the sense that people coming from outside can't speak Irish, or that they're a

little bit locked down. So we've got that moment [in the film] where Shoo is in the shop, and they say, "Oh, she's another tourist." And she says, "Well, actually I'm from Dublin." She's able to use the fact that she speaks fluent Irish to have a little moment for herself, which I think is fun and also does reflect [life]. I'm not trying to romanticize any element of it. I'm trying to present Ireland as I see it.

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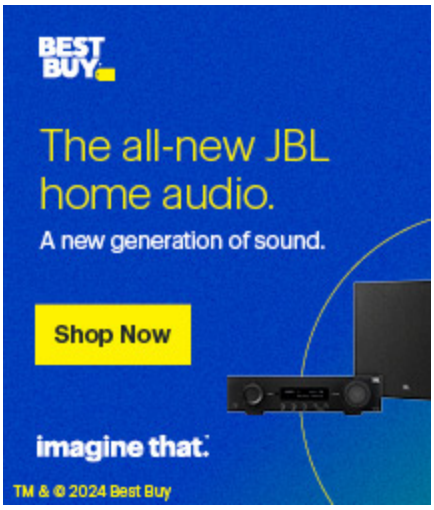

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The film features two particularly strong women. Do you ever think of yourself as a feminist filmmaker?

If you're a woman, it's really hard to not be a feminist if you have self-respect. It's just impossible to escape it, even if you don't use that word. I have … the right word would probably be rage, [against] the historical treatment of women in Ireland. And it just naturally

comes out. How I approach stories, I'm not putting the cart before the horse. If I'm going to make a film that's largely a woman's story, which was intentional, because I think there are so many Irish stories that are actually men's stories, I thought there's my opportunity to do this. And because there is so much to say about women's experience in Ireland, it naturally becomes a feminist story without that necessarily being the point. It's just the natural place it takes you to.

The Devil's Doorway was also a religious mystery. I think I know part of the answer but, where does your interest in exploring religious issues come from and how important has religion been in your life?

The influence of the church in Ireland, historically, is so heavy and overbearing and has really infiltrated every aspect of life that it's impossible to escape. Also, in Ireland we have our own little brand of Catholicism. People think of Ireland, rightly, as a very Catholic country, which it is. But it has its own take on that. There's a lot of folklore, superstition and myth — pagan elements really, that are folded into how people actually practice religion in Ireland.

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If you go to any rural town in Ireland and ask around, you'll find that there'll be a faith healer somewhere. There'll be some guy who's the seventh son of the seventh son, or so, and they can cure things. But they will invoke the Virgin Mary when they are doing this. They will use the crucifix. They will incorporate Catholic elements into that.

So in Ireland, the things — folklore, superstition, myth and religion, Catholicism — are completely intertwined. But anyway, they are the same thing, aren't they? Superstition, myth, religion. There's not really any difference if you're not someone who practices the faith, and I'm not a religious person. But I can't escape the power of the church in Ireland. So if I'm talking about trauma, which I am in this film, it has to be there. That's that is the primary kind of totem.

Where does your fascination with or even love for horror come from? Someone recently told me that watching a horror movie may be less scary than watching the news…
In the house and family that I grew up in, there are a lot of horror fans and ghost stories. My dad was big into cinema in general, but particularly horror. So I saw horror films quite young. I saw *The Exorcist* when I was seven. I had an early introduction to all of this. And I was a very anxious child. I was one of those kids who was worried about everything that was happening in the world. So horror became a comforting thing to me. It was something that we did as a family on a Friday night.

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As your friend said, the world out there is so bad, but horror takes place in a controlled space. We know that there is going to be an end to the movie. We know that it's going to have rules. And I think this is a useful valve for people who are naturally prone to anxiety. I think it can function in that way. And I think it's also a very useful tool for exploring trauma, delicate issues that are hard to grapple with and deal with. I think horror is a really great way of putting it out into the public conversation and exploring some things that we

don’t necessarily want to look at face-on yet. We can do it via the filter of a narrative.

Aislinn Clarke COURTESY OF AISLINN CLARKE

Do you think *Fréwaka*, or horror in general, has universal appeal and can find a global audience?

I wanted the film to be an unapologetically Irish film. I wanted to present my lens on Ireland and how we are dealing or not dealing with our past traumas, and that was my primary goal. But I always have faith that horror does travel because it’s an emotional medium, and it finds its way. It’s universal in that sense. We can all understand it. We can see that from how successful Japanese and Korean horror or Spanish horror has been in the Western world. Horror fans are very keen to watch films from other places and cultures. So I was faithful to it as an Irish horror film. But I also trusted that, if you do a good job with how you handle the horror, it will travel.

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The house, in which Peig lives, is also a key character in the film. How did you find it?

Nobody [in film or TV] has ever used it for anything before, which is incredible, because Ireland is a small place — a lot of stuff gets shot there, but nobody's ever used this place as a location before. I think it's because it's on the border, pretty much, between the North and South of Ireland. So for decades, it would have been a very tricky place to go, with the war ongoing and all that.

But one of the producers found it. Someone had told him there was this house in the forest. So he went to look at it, and then he brought me to see it. It's the only house we looked at. But I was in there for two minutes before I started to get this wild feeling of deja vu. And I thought, "I've been in this house before." I spoke to the owner, and we worked out that I had been there when I was 21 at a party. Yes, I'd been in the house before, and it was quite eerie. It was the first place and the only place we looked at. It was the right place.

The family still lives in the house. It's an older man and his son, and the kitchen in particular, we didn't even touch. But Nicola Moroney, our production designer did such an amazing job in other parts of the house. The only thing we built was the red door [that plays a key role in the movie]. Everything else, that's what that house looks like.

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Anything you can share yet about your next film? And do you see yourself doing a non-horror project?
I think it would be strange to categorize yourself as someone who only makes horror films. I've always found that to be a bit odd. I think it's about the stories and what you're attracted to. But I do love horror, and because I've made, at this point, two horror films, that's what I tend to have conversations about in the industry.

But I do have some stuff that is not straightforwardly horror, although it does always lean towards the dark side in some way. I'm probably not going to make a rom-com. I have a project in development currently with Paramount, which is a horror film, a straightforwardly genre film. And I think that will probably be my next one if the stars align and everything goes to plan, and that's what I'm going to be working on next. I'm not sure [I can share more].

But in the future, if the story is something that I feel like I can really do something with, I'm open to almost anything.

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